

Transforming United States Air Forces in Europe and Empowering Poland

F-16s Fly East

LT COL CHRISTOPHER S. SAGE, USAF*

USAFE continues to transform itself . . . with a greater focus on Eastern Europe.

—Gen Tom Hobbins, USAF, Retired
Former Commander
United States Air Forces in Europe

Poland is probably the most pro-American society in Europe.

—Lech Kaczyński
President, Republic of Poland

IN THE INTERNATIONAL arena of strategic alliances, windows of opportunity for momentous change are rare and fleeting. Creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) at the start of the Cold War was one of them; the end of the Cold War and the global strategic environment following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (9/11) present the next opportunity. Poland stands out as an eager member of NATO and a strong supporter of US policy. Indeed, the Polish military recently took unprecedented steps to embrace Western concepts, training, and hardware.¹ At the same time, United States Air Forces in Europe (USAFE) is tasked with broadening relations with new NATO nations in Eastern Europe, gravitating away from its significant Western European presence during the Cold War.² Therefore, it is in the national interest of the United States to continue to transform USAFE by relocating US F-16s currently in Italy to new bases in Poland.

Strategic, military, and political interests for both Poland and the United States are aligning to make this move possible, but only for a short period of time. A staunch supporter of US foreign policy in Iraq and Afghanistan, having committed troops to both theaters, Poland is eager for US reciprocity.³ Hosting US fighters, combined with agreeing to base part of the United States' ballistic missile defense (BMD) shield on its soil, will make Poland a stronger strategic partner in the region. Poland is currently upgrading its civil and military aviation infrastructure as F-16s continue to arrive, an acquisition made possible by an unprecedented foreign military sales deal coupled with US congressional loans and business investment.⁴ A US-friendly political environment persists in Poland as Russian rhetoric intensifies, but this situation could change as nationalistic voices sometimes critical of US policy get louder.

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Author's note: Since this article was written, the conflict in Georgia and renewed plans to deploy missiles to Kaliningrad reveal that a resurgent Russia is increasingly willing to confront friends and allies of the United States in its sphere of influence. Such actions reinforce the need to strengthen US military relationships with Poland.

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The Strategic Environment

The *National Military Strategy of the United States of America* (2004) addresses the importance of proper posturing and presence to assure our friends, enhance interoperability, and improve our ability to prosecute the global war on terror (GWOT). It also challenges combatant commanders to adjust troop levels to enable “multinational forces to act promptly and globally.”⁵ A decision to move F-16s into Poland would meet these objectives at a time when Russia is flexing its muscles, specifically at Poland, over controversy surrounding the BMD initiative. In 2002, through a program known as Poland Peace Sky, the Polish Air Force purchased 48 F-16s, thus ensuring hardware commonality, heightened interoperability, and in-depth training in US tactics and operational warfare.⁶ The initial cadre of Polish F-16 pilots is training at US bases until the Polish Air Force can stand up training of its own with the help of US instructor pilots serving as exchange officers.⁷ Poland’s emerging modern fighting force will put that nation on the leading edge of technology, able to respond regionally and globally under the NATO banner.

USAFE’s Theater Security Cooperation Program office published a directive in 2006 calling for stepped-up relations with Poland, including increased military-to-military cooperation and training with the goal of gaining air and base access, as well as building up the forces of our NATO ally.⁸ The larger strategic implications of establishing closer ties with Poland involve the embracing of changing European relationships and the quiet positioning of forces closer to Russia in the interest of strategic influence.⁹ Moving US forces further east will also disperse our strong presence in Western Europe, which could be crippled if governments deny the deployment of forces from their territory during unpopular wars.¹⁰

Conditions in Italy

Clearly a staunch supporter of US policy since the early days of the GWOT, Italy hosts thousands of service personnel, including the

US Sixth Fleet, multiple Army posts, and air bases, as well as NATO’s Defense College and Southern Command. But governments change, and political and social attitudes less supportive of US foreign policy persist in some sectors of Italian society. These feelings became evident in 2006 when newly elected prime minister Romano Prodi was almost driven from power over the controversial decision to authorize the expansion of Camp Ederle in Vicenza.¹¹ Opposition to an increased US presence garnered huge rallies numbering between 40,000 and 100,000 protestors.¹² These same hostile elements within Italian society also present security and force-protection concerns to US commanders in Italy.

Aviano Air Base (AB), located in northern Italy, 75 miles north of Venice, hosts the 31st Fighter Wing, two operational squadrons of F-16s, and approximately 1,700 personnel, not including dependents.¹³ On the local level, Aviano has its challenges. At the time of the base’s establishment in 1911 by the Italian Air Force, it was located in a rural area.¹⁴ Today, however, growing villages and towns surround Aviano, dividing it into seven separate geographic areas—a situation that poses logistical challenges as well as force-protection concerns.¹⁵ Limited real estate inside Aviano’s perimeter renders base housing virtually nonexistent.¹⁶

The base had a history of expeditionary fighter visits until the United States permanently relocated Air Force fighters from Spain in 1992. Tactical-training conditions have slowly deteriorated since their arrival, with increased airline operations across Europe and the Adriatic Sea having gradually degraded medium-altitude airspace used for air-to-air training.¹⁷ Moreover, low-altitude training suffers from population encroachment and political sensitivities—heightened by an incident involving a Navy EA-6B that caused a cable-car disaster in 1998—and for all practical purposes, air-to-ground training does not exist.¹⁸ Additionally, the absence of usable ranges in Italy prevents training with live ordnance, a skill critical to tactical fighters.¹⁹

The United States’ long-standing relationship with Italy has weathered the storm, but underlying challenges and concerns persist,

which US leaders must mitigate to the best of their abilities. Although Italy will most likely continue to host large numbers of US forces, one can make the case for seizing the opportunity to move US fighters to a friendlier and less restrictive political environment in the Republic of Poland.

A Friend in Poland

A nation in transition, Poland eagerly threw off the chains of communism, quickly embraced Western ideals and institutions, and began a continuous program of military modernization. NATO rewarded its efforts in 1999 with alliance membership. A friend of the United States in the GWOT, supporting operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan with few or no restrictions, Poland even led the Multinational Division Central-South in Iraq from 2003 to 2007 and is currently considering sending more troops to Afghanistan.²⁰ The Polish president recently stated that “it’s not a gesture. It’s an obligation. We are a member of an alliance. We feel it our duty to respond. . . . So we count on reciprocity.”²¹ At a time when the promised payback of Iraqi contracts never occurred and when the United States is asking more of Poland with regard to missile basing for the BMD shield, the president’s statement reflects a sentiment that his country is ready for *quid pro quo* in the form of bilateral security guarantees.²² Some analysts think that this will come in the form of Patriot missiles, but an equally assuring gesture of US commitment to Poland involves the proposed basing of two squadrons of US fighter aircraft.²³ Such a move would help strengthen our NATO partner on the eastern frontier.

We could easily colocate fighter aircraft at current Polish F-16 bases undergoing world-class modernization as they continue to receive their new fleet of fighters through 2009.²⁴ Sharing bases would accelerate training, benefiting both air forces while quickly integrating the new Polish squadrons at the operational and tactical levels within NATO. Poland’s excellent low-level flying routes as well as air-to-air and air-to-ground training ranges, including

much-needed access to live-weapons ranges, would greatly enhance training for US pilots.²⁵ As Gen Tom Hobbins, former USAFE commander, pointed out, “The traditional [Western] European civilian air traffic environment has drastically constrained our ability to train.”²⁶ These constraints do not exist in Eastern Europe.

Basing two US squadrons with the accompanying support package, including families, would also benefit the local economy and enable the United States to affect Polish society through direct engagement. This integration should meet little resistance since the Polish people tend to be a homogeneous, pro-American society with little internal turmoil or conflict.²⁷

Russia Responds

When Poland secured its F-16 contract from the United States, Russia immediately based new S-300 air defense systems in Belarus, leaving little doubt that moving US fighter squadrons into a country that borders Russian soil (Kaliningrad) would invoke a response.²⁸ Such a proposed move, coupled with the current controversy over the BMD shield, requires the United States to tread cautiously and diplomatically.

That is, we must consider and skillfully mitigate the strategic risk that this action introduces to US and NATO relations with Russia. The United States should build on the fact that there are currently two US instructor pilots in Poland who are training Polish aircrews and frame the movement as a continuation and expansion of the agreed-upon training program. The United States could also associate the move with the current BMD initiative, presenting it as a related bilateral security agreement.

We need additional, careful calculation to gauge the Russian response. Aggressive Russian action could potentially destabilize the region, and Russia could remove itself from additional arms- and troop-limiting treaties, building on its recent suspension of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.²⁹ The US presence in Central Asia also prompted Russia to move troops and aircraft to a nearby Russian airfield in 2003.³⁰ Based

on this recent posturing, the United States and Poland should expect similar Russian responses to this plan.

Challenges

No doubt, the proposed move of fighters to Poland is ambitious and will face many challenges—especially the cost to American taxpayers. Locating our forces at a Polish base already undergoing modernization by the host country can mitigate the financial burden, but expected expenditures could possibly exceed \$1 billion, the estimated price tag for the Army's expansion in Italy.³¹

Other challenges include environmental concerns and decaying infrastructure left over from the Soviet era as well as poor logistical support in Eastern Europe.³² We also need to evaluate and improve the air-traffic-control infrastructure. Furthermore, quality-of-life issues could emerge because Polish living standards, though rapidly improving, still lag behind those of Western Europe. Also worth noting is the fact that recent public discourse in Poland revealed a split in opinion over the US BMD plan.³³ Those who oppose BMD basing in Poland will no doubt attempt to block the arrival of US fighter squadrons by using similar arguments. Though daunting, these challenges can be overcome by relying on the

United States' experience with setting up bases in allied countries.

Conclusion

In an unstable post-9/11 world, Europe has experienced more stability than other regions, but the security environment in Eastern Europe continues to change. Gen Bantz Craddock, commander of European Command, is currently reevaluating a 2005 security plan that restructures current basing in Europe and reduces US troop levels from more than 110,000 to 60,000.³⁴ One analyst remarks that troop levels must stay at a level high enough to send a "forceful message to allies and potential foes alike."³⁵ Moving F-16s from Aviano AB to Poland would send precisely this message, cementing US-Polish relations. It would also increase the interoperability of NATO allies flying the same weapon system, strengthen an emerging ally eager for our support, and enhance the combat capability of USAF F-16 units by removing barriers to training prevalent in Western Europe. This proposal is a strategic move that would benefit the operational and tactical environments. We must act now since the window of opportunity will not remain open for long. □

Washington, DC

Notes

1. The Members of Europe, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Eurasia Division, and the Deputy Under Secretary of the Air Force, International Affairs, "Transforming Poland's Military: A Focus on Western Concepts, Training, and Hardware," *Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management (DISAM) Journal* 28-1 (Fall 2005): 17, <http://www.dbsoftware.pl/Transforming-Poland-s-military--a-focus-on-western-concepts-training-and-hardware.php> (accessed 17 July 2008).

2. Michael Sirak, "Hobbins: USAF Continues to Transform and Look Eastward and Southward," *Defense Daily* 235, no. 19 (27 July 2007), <http://defensedailynetwork.com/VIP/common/pub/dd/dd07270708.html> (accessed 9 September 2007).

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Journal, 12 March 2007, A3, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe> (accessed 9 September 2007).

4. Robert Little, "U.S. Dollars Wooed Ally in Iraq Coalition," *Information Clearing House*, 17 October 2004, <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article7097.htm> (accessed 8 October 2007).

5. *National Military Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2004), 11, <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Mar2005/d20050318nms.pdf>.

6. Members of Europe et al., "Transforming Poland's Military," 17.

7. Ibid.

8. Louis A. Arana-Barradas, "USAF Reaching Out to Establish Security Ties," 30 March 2006, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?did=1031123111&Fmt=3&clientid=18762&RQT=309&VName=PQD> (accessed 25 September 2007).

9. "U.S., Europe and Russia: Shifting Bases, Shifting Priorities," *STRATFOR*, 11 December 2003, http://www.stratfor.com/products/premium/read_article.php?id=225616 (accessed 9 September 2007).

10. Ibid. German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, a leading critic of the Iraq invasion, sided with France in attempting to block any military action. This highlighted the fact that basing 80 percent of US troop strength (in Europe) in one country might not be a good idea. With the consolidation of the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Italy (from Germany), US troop strength in Italy will increase.

11. Christine Spolar, "War Outcry Hits U.S. Base in Italy," *Santa Barbara News-Press*, 20 March 2007, <http://www.newspress.com/Top/Article/article.jsp?Section=WORLD&ID=564984226296234087> (accessed 23 September 2007). It is worth noting that Prodi ultimately lost a vote of confidence in January 2008, due to additional political crises, and was replaced on 8 May 2008 by Berlusconi, who has a track record of supporting US foreign policy.

12. "Tens of Thousands Protest Plan to Expand US Air Base in Italy," *Agence France-Presse*, February 2007, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_kmafp/is_200702/ai_n18655184 (accessed 8 October 2007).

13. "The Air Force in Facts and Figures," *Air Force Magazine* 90, no. 5 (May 2007): 51, <http://www.afa.org/magazine/may2007/0507structure.pdf> (accessed 12 October 2007).

14. "Guide to Air Force Installations Worldwide," *Air Force Magazine* 90, no. 5 (May 2007): 118, <http://www.afa.org/magazine/may2007/0507bases.pdf> (accessed 12 October 2007).

15. "Aviano Air Base, Pordenone, Italy," *GlobalSecurity.org*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/aviano.htm> (accessed 8 October 2007).

16. Maj John Bosone, Naval War College student and former F-16 pilot at Aviano AB, to the author, e-mail, 30 September 2007.

17. "Air Transport Portal of the European Commission: Traffic Management," http://ec.europa.eu/transport/air_portal/traffic_management/sesame/index_en.htm (accessed 12 October 2007).

18. The author's observations during a deployment to Italy, January to June 1999. The one-year anniversary of the cable-car incident was 3 February 1999.

19. Bosone to the author, e-mail. Currently there are no air-to-ground ranges open to US fighters in Italy. The nearest range, located in Germany, is rarely used due to its distance from Aviano and the lack of available range time. The air-to-air range's airspace, normally capped at 24,000 feet, must be released by the Italian Air Force prior to use.

20. Blanchfield, "Poland Counts on NATO's Help," A3.

21. Ibid.

22. Jeffrey Fleishman, "U.S. Ally Fears Price for Loyalty," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 March 2007, A12, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/mar/16/world/fg-missile16> (accessed 17 July 2008).

23. "Polish Missile Defense Help Might Come at a Price," *Global Security Newswire*, 19 July 2007, http://www.nti.org/d_newswire/issues/2007/7/19/989c2b85-3392-4ba0-8fc1-f7ef0ab4f8b0.html (accessed 23 September 2007).

24. Members of Europe et al., "Transforming Poland's Military," 17.

25. Lt Col Eric Salomonson, US F-16 exchange instructor pilot at Krzesiny AB, Poland, to the author, e-mail, 11 October 2007. Polish F-16s, currently located at Krzesiny, will eventually arrive at Lask AB, both of which have brand-new, world-class facilities. The air-to-air airspace extends up to 66,000 feet in one range, allowing for high-altitude and supersonic training not possible in Italian airspace (capped at 24,000 feet, according to Major Bosone [see note 16]). The Nadarzyce air-to-ground bombing range allows for all types of weapon deliveries, including laser-guided bombs.

26. Sirak, "Hobbins."

27. "The World Factbook," *Central Intelligence Agency*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/pl.html> (accessed 9 September 2007).

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29. Sergei Blagov, "Missiles for Kaliningrad," *International Relations and Security Network*, 16 July 2007, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=17863> (accessed 14 October 2007).

30. "Poland Sees U.S. Missile Shield Deal by October, As Russia Beefs Up Kyrgyzstan Base," *Agence France-Presse*, 27 June 2007, http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Poland_Sees_U.S._Missile_Shield_Deal_By_October_As_Russia_Beefs_Up_Kyrgyzstan_Base_999.html (accessed 9 September 2007).

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33. Steven A. Hildreth and Carl Ek, *Long-Range Ballistic Missile Defense in Europe*, CRS Report for Congress, RL34051 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 13 June 2008), CRS-8, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/RL34051.pdf>.

34. Gordon Lubold, "Should More US Troops Be Kept in Europe?" *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 April 2007, 3, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0424/p03s03-usmi.html> (accessed 17 July 2008).

35. Ibid.